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Béatrice Laurent (ed.), *Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain, Cultural, Literary and Artistic Explorations of a Myth*

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REFERENCES

Béatrice Laurent (ed.), *Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain*, Cultural, Literary and Artistic Explorations of a Myth, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), 248 p. ISBN 978-3-0343-1745-0

- 1 *Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain* is a remarkable collection of articles which uses the interdisciplinary approach to examine a whole network of correspondences between the arts, literature and science, thus conjuring up a new powerful picture of Victorian culture and its tensions over the last three decades of the 19th century. In her article “The Strange Case of the Victorian Sleeping Maid”, Béatrice Laurent, who edited the collection, describes the motif of the Sleeping Beauty as “a complex, in the sense that it involved scientific, cultural, literary and artistic components each resonating with the others.”(27). On the one hand, the motif of sleep triggers a scientific and artistic exploration of the border zone between physical life and the inner psyche, while, on the other hand, the image of eternal youth and beauty crystallizes ambivalent visions of women as saints or *femme fatales*. The motif invites a new approach to Victorian writers like Charles Dickens and Anne Thackeray and it weaves patterns of continuity between art movements usually considered separately, like the Neoclassicists, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists.
- 2 The Victorian creative spirit wove together images inherited from Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the folklore of fairy tales to present a pregnant symbol of the tensions and aspirations of its time. Laurence Roussillon-Constanty convincingly demonstrates

how mythology and medieval art and literature provided Rossetti with models for exploring the relation between the senses and the spirit through the interpenetration of poetry and the arts. His sleeping figures endowed with a visionary quality allowed him “to invest painting with the narrative and introspective qualities one finds in poetry” (129) and to convey the tensions between bodily pleasures and ideal beauty. Fairy tales more recently revived in the public imagination by the English translations of The Brothers Grimm also offered powerful symbols to explore the inner psyche and to reflect upon the norms and conventions shaping Victorian society, as Manuela d’Amore highlights in her stimulating analysis of Anne Thackeray’s *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* in the light of Victorian women’s education (73-94).

- 3 Scientists and artists set out to discover the unknown territory of sleep at the border of life and death as well as the dark zones of the subconscious. As sleeping patterns changed to adapt to the industrial age, sleeping disorders increasingly attracted interest from the medical community. With great efficiency Muriel Adrien examines the permeability between science and art with the revival of the motif of the Sleeping Beauty in late 19th-century painting from the Neoclassicists to the Pre-Raphaelites and their wider circle (7-16), while Béatrice Laurent’s thorough examination of medical publications on protracted sleep shows how scientific reports incorporated images taken not only from myths but also from fairy tales (27-52).
- 4 Dead bodies were also an object for scientific experimentation and art supplemented science when wax effigies were used for anatomic study. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas convincingly develops the paradox of bodies both preserved and dismembered, in order to explore the interpenetration of science and literature, taking the example of Charles Dickens’ textual model in *Great Expectations* (53-72). The fascination with death and its *memento mori* pervaded Victorian society with Queen Victoria herself setting a model by publicly mourning her deceased husband. Anne Chassagnol’s very interesting article on funeral photographs and on John Anster Fitzgerald’s fairy paintings discloses death as an aesthetic object, as bodies were artistically preserved, adorned with jewels and beautiful clothes, painted and photographed as if frozen in eternal sleep, thus holding an eternal mirror to Victorian fashion (181-200).
- 5 Sleeping beauties also reigned over the dark realm of dreams, inspiring artists with profuse and intense creativity. Dreams crystallized scientific and artistic interest, on the one hand as an instrument to reveal the power of the subconscious and, on the other hand, as a source of inspiration. Stefania Arcara shows that dreams derived from the use of laudanum – a common medicine then to heal mental ailing – became a tool for artistic creation that women painters like Lizzie Siddal resorted to at will, using doctors’ prescriptions to enhance their aesthetic experience, thus reversing submission into “a potentially liberating space for imaginative experimentation” (105). Opium became symbolic of this process of creation, inspiring motifs and colours, like the red hues in John Anster Fitzgerald’s picture, as Anne Chassagnol notes. Sleeping Beauties encapsulate an ambivalent vision of women seen either as passive or active players of their fate. Stefania Arcara’s fascinating article discloses a paradox in the representation of Elizabeth Siddal who, though usually viewed as an icon of feminine submissiveness, also embodied a liberated woman, master of her own desires. Laurence Roussillon-Constanty notices the same ambivalence in Rossetti’s depiction of women, in particular in *The House of Life* poems, in which he “does not so much picture his beloved as a sleeping muse than as a sexually active beauty” (135) empowered by the creativity she

inspires in the artist, and whose apparent submissive posture in sleep is delusive. In her very interesting essay on Julia Margaret Cameron's Pre-Raphaelite-style photographs, Marie Cordié-Lévy demonstrates that usual representations of love are subverted to question women's nature and aspirations. Thus she comments on the effigy-like portrait of twenty-year old Alice Liddell, perhaps an emblem of "how lethal beauty is when it is reduced to the only alternatives to dowry and heritage in the quest of a husband" (209).

- 6 The Sleeping Beauty's mystic presence hovers between God's will and man's awakening creative power, reflecting the pangs of the artist torn between a more doubtful apprehension of God's existence and the temptation to retreat within his own emotional universe. While religious motifs remained a source of inspiration, for symbolists and supporters of art for art's sake they became a vehicle for self-referential art with the artist becoming the supreme creative power, feeding on his own dreams and experience. Cristina Pascu-Tulbure's excellent analysis of the growing divergence between Ruskin and Burne-Jones, reflected in their interpretations of the Sleeping Beauty tale, emphasizes opposed visions of women as saints or *femmes fatales* which mirror the two men's own love relationships (149-80). In contrast with Burne-Jones who increasingly explored levels of consciousness and intimate fantasies, Ruskin's doomed and chaste relationship with Rose inspired a mystic vision conforming to the Christian pattern of death and resurrection.
- 7 The theme of the Sleeping Beauty highlights the continuity between art movements in late 19th-century culture, as is demonstrated by Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada in her masterly study. The motif crystallized painters' fascination with the nude body – a source of sensuous pleasure or the image of a sublimated desire – although art critics of the time subdued the erotic quality of pictures by enhancing their formal beauty. From Leighton, Alma-Tadema and Moore to the Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists, the representation of women asleep wove a pattern of continuity in the enduring exploration of the body and the human psyche.
- 8 In her introduction Béatrice Laurent hopes that the volume will "encourage readers, scholars and art connoisseurs to view differently a familiar Victorian trope" (5). At the same time the collection has a wider scope, since it also provides an interpretation of painting, photography, literature, science and culture that encompasses key issues at the time – the tensions between the body and the spirit, the survival of ideals in the industrial age and the exploration of the human psyche. Because it conjures up an illuminating portrait of Victorian culture in its continuity and its variations, *Sleeping Beauties* will be read with great interest by many scholars of that period in cultural, literary and artistic studies.

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Subjects: British painting

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